
Friendship and Church

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

How many friends do you have? How many friends do I have?

I admit, with much embarrassment, how often I used to look for the answer to that question in the early days of Facebook. Most of us know Facebook, which has been described as “an online social media and social network services company.”

I don’t really know whether the Facebook service still keeps track of how many “friends” its users have. But it sure used to. In the early days of my usage, I was among many seduced into counting the number of “friends” my page accumulated, posted right there on my home page. I would try not to notice that I was keeping count. But I was.

Of course, I can be counted as a rather public figure; and many people, whether parishioners or not, were eager to count me as a “friend.” And I was eager to do the same. That way, we thought, we could keep up with one another. Whether we would actually meet each other’s definition of a true “friend” was not the point. We were using that term to keep track of each other, and, in some instances, to market ourselves to each other. Facebook was often a form of a brag sheet.

Yesterday, I remembered those early experiences of Facebook when I noticed a brilliant phrase written by a woman whose online service I do read regularly. She is Maria Popova, and she publishes a brief and brilliant newsletter every Sunday called *Brain Pickings*.

This past week, she wrote succinctly on “friendship.” In her opening remarks, she casually mentioned how we have begun “commodifying the word ‘friend’ by egregious misuse and overuse in the hands of so-called social media” (*Brain Pickings*, Sunday, August 19, 2018).

“Commodify” can mean to turn a value into an item of trade, or to make something have a sale-able economic value. When we commodify our friendships, we try to count them so that the number can signify our own value. “I have a hundred friends” can be equal to “I have a hundred dollars.” And, of course, that is not true at all. Friendships are not things that I own, not objective values to be counted and accumulated and stacked up in my ego storehouse!

Others have written beautiful definitions of what it means to be, or to have, a friend. Maria Popova, inspired by Amelie Rorty and Rainer Maria Rilke, proposes “levels of friendship” in concentric circles. The largest circle contains “acquaintances.” A smaller circle inside that one consists of “people we know and like.” The next more intimate circle contains “kindred spirits.” Finally, in the circle of people closest to us are “true friends,” whom Popova suggests are “people with whom we are willing to share, not without embarrassment but without fear of judgment, our gravest imperfections and the most anguishing instances of falling short of our own ideals and values. The concentrating and consecrating force that transmutes a kinship of spirit into a friendship is emotional and psychological intimacy. A friend is a person before whom we can strip our ideal self in order to reveal the real self, vulnerable and imperfect, and yet trust that it wouldn’t diminish the friend’s admiration and sincere affection for the whole self, comprising both the ideal and the real.” (*Brain Pickings*, 19 August 2018).

Towards the end of his earthly life, Jesus said to his closest followers, “I do not call you servants any longer..., but I have

called you friends” (John 15:15). I believe he had in mind that strongest notion of “friend,” someone with whom we are sharing our true self, without fear of embarrassment or judgment.

Churches, which are communities of people and communities of faith, contain all manner of relationships. Some of us know each other well, and some of us do not know one another at all. All of us can hardly be “friends” with each other yet. But we can surely have true intimacy and true sharing and true friendship as our goal. That goal of vulnerable friendship, however, will mean releasing ourselves from judgement – releasing ourselves from having to judge others who are not like us. In fact, Facebook has been rightly accused of assembling “friends” by just those standards; their algorithms seem to point users to other people who are already just like them.

The goal of “church,” and communities of faith, is to make friends with people who are not like us at all. Our goal is to be a community that is not assembled by fleeting standards of lesser cultural or political identity. Our identity is in Jesus, who truly does want to be our friend. It is Jesus who shares his true self, full of vulnerability and strength with us. That’s the kind of friend we need, and the kind of friend we seek to be: friends willing to share ourselves, intimately, without judgment or embarrassment; friends connecting across boundaries of cultural or political difference, and across algorithms that might otherwise separate people out. That kind of friendship requires strength and truth; it requires love and faith. But that is friendship in Jesus Christ our Lord.